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Nickelodeon Theaters in Lodi

by Maurice Hill and Ralph Lea

Moving pictures were being shown in New York City in 1894 at Kinetoscope Parlors. Two years later Thomas Edison had built a camera and projector, Vitacope, that made viewing moving film enjoyable. Important events such as the Champion Prize Fight of Corbett and Fitzsimmons and the Passion Play filmed in Germany helped to bring people to the theater. In 1903 a film was made with the first good story, "The Great Train Robbery." This encouraged the making of drama with a beginning, middle and end in one reel of 12-14 minutes

of screen time.

Two years later there were many films available on a rental basis and the moving picture theater came to all large towns in the United States. The Nickelodeon era was to extend for nine years; someone could rent a store, buy a projector, place chairs in the building and be in business.

Nickelodeons were seldom a nickel, but for ten cents the early movie goer went inside the theater and saw a mixture of brief adventure, comedy or fantasy film that lasted about an hour. The program and film needed a piano

player for sing-alongs, inexpensive vaudeville acts and sometimes illustrated lectures.

To positively say who was the first person to show moving pictures in a Lodi theater would be hard, but we do know that there were three starting about the same time in 1908.

A public notice in the Lodi Sentinel reported that the "New Ideal Motion Picture Theatre" opened for business March 5, 1908 on North School Street. They advertised the newest and best in moving pictures with the latest musical selections on the grand electrical



1908 — Lodi Opera House, Pine Street

piano. There would be a change of program twice a week with matinees Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday. This was the first and last to be heard of the Ideal in the newspaper.

The new theater was just a short distance from the Lodi Opera House and may have forced the following statement from Fred Lee, the manager: "that he was going to install a moving picture machine as a permanent fixture to use whenever the opera house was not being used by dramatic companies or local talent." He further stated that an A-1 machine and operator had been secured with a choice of 21 reels of pictures every week, with a change of programs each night. Plus good talent was available to sing illustrated songs.

Lee added that pictures will be presented only on Friday or Saturday of each week beginning July 10, 1908 with no Sunday shows. He also stated that the Opera House is cool and comfortable and that the performance will begin at 7:30 p.m. and run continuously until 10:30 p.m., with three songs and no end of pictures, so you can stay until satisfied.

Four days after starting movies, the Opera House decided to show the moving picture, "The Passion Play" on Wednesday and Thursday, with a singer from Sacramento singing "The Holy City" and other songs with Perry Howe at the piano.

The Lodi Sentinel announced on July 23, 1908, that tonight and tomorrow night the great spiritual drama, "Parsifal" will be presented in moving pictures at the Big Tent on Elm Street, west of the post office. There will be 2,850 feet of clean pictures.

This was not the opening of the theater that later became the "Tokay," but the founder, Henry Lighthouse, came to Lodi in 1906 and his granddaughter, Mrs. Harl Young, confirmed Maurice Hill's theory that Lighthouse started his theater a month or two earlier.

On July 28, 1908 the newspaper reported that the Novelty Theater in Stockton had a fire, spurring competition in Lodi. In order to combat the new theater on Elm Street, the Lodi Opera House announced that they had moving pictures tonight and every night throughout the week.

Henry Lighthouse came to Lodi because his daughter, Mrs. A.J. Cook, lived here. He exchanged his tent for a flimsily constructed structure on the same location in 1908 and by September 2, 1909 he reports that by popular vote, Marguerite, nine month old daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Leslie T. Bawdey was proclaimed prettiest baby at his Lodi motion picture theater and won as a prize a baby carriage.

Just a month later the Sentinel reported that the theater on West Elm Street has undergone a complete renovation in order to meet the demand in attendance and the building has been enlarged. The walls have been prettily lined with red burlap and decorated with gilt moulding. The chairs are quite comfortable and the building is well heated. Mr. Lighthouse has recently secured a new line of pictures and is showing four reels of pictures each evening in addition to other attractions.

August 11, 1908, the Lodi Opera House secures a new picture machine (projector), a motiograph, the latest and most expensive machine on the market. It is absolutely without a flicker!

Another Nickelodeon Theater emerged in the basement of the new three-story concrete Madison Building on the northwest corner of Sacramento and Oak Streets on May 10, 1910. The "Leisure Hour Theatre" was showing four reels of pictures at an evening performance, children 5¢, adults 10¢.

In January of 1911 the Madison Building was converted to a fifty-room hotel in the top two stories and nothing more was heard about the Leisure Hour Theatre.

The patronage of the motion picture theater on Elm has grown until at present, May 31, 1910, the place is crowded each evening. With few exceptions, the audience observes the common rule of respect to those in back of them by removing their hats. If not, it is impossible for anyone to see the picture.

By October, 1910 the Lodi Motion Picture House on Elm Street had grown to the extent that the seating capacity was inadequate. Mr. Lighthouse's intention was to build a new building that would occupy the entire lot. It was to be erected over the old building so that performances could continue nightly. He would have built immediately had he been allowed to erect the building with wood, but the location being inside the city fire limit, the building must be fireproof.

About this same time we had one more Lodi Theater open its doors. The Lyric Theatre was located on the north side of Pine Street near School Street. D.D. Smith's Dry Goods Store was on the west and the Elwell Cafe on the east side.

Something must have happened to the lease on Pine Street for in April, 1911, B.F. Best of San Francisco was looking for a new location for the Lyric Theatre. He selected the lot at 106



1910 — Lyric Theatre on the north side of Pine Street

North Sacramento Street owned by John C. Burson, father of Dr. Stanley Burson, one of Lodi's popular and prominent dentists. The building formerly had the Brier Hardware and Furniture Store, operated by John Brier, early pastor of the Lodi Congregational Church.

A five year lease was secured by Mr. Best and Grant Green. The Lyric had its grand opening on Saturday, May 13, 1911. The house was packed to see the show and sported a completely remodeled interior. Besides moving pictures, a Miss Young of Stockton sang illustrated songs. Miss Effie Florence of Lodi played the piano.

The new theater on Sacramento Street spurred Henry Lighthouse into starting work on a new reinforced concrete theater building to take the place of the old play house. The 40' x 105' brick theater was completed the 27th of July, 1911, and open for business with a small store on each side of the entrance, a barber shop on the left and a candy kitchen on the right side. At this time the name was changed from the Lodi Motion Picture Theatre to the Tokay Theatre.

The Lyric Theatre was importing singers and musicians and on September 7th, Ted Ross, high baritone, entertained. While the following month the theater employed expert pianist Ivan Wallace from St. Louis. A week later Miss Gladys Walters accepted a position as pianist at the Lyric.

The public must have be enjoying the programs because on October 21, 1911, the Lyric enlarged the seating capacity and added a stage.

On December 21, 1911, the Lyric Theatre presented talking pictures. This consisted of professional actors standing behind the screen and reading their lines. Although those who witnessed the show were pleased, this did not prove popular enough for the theater to pay the additional expense.

Henry Lighthouse added a partner, Herb W. Sievers, at the Tokay in early 1912, who worked at the Enterprise Men's Clothing Store as a clerk. Mr. Barron was the projector operator during this period.

The Tokay Theatre was showing moving pictures of the 1906 earthquake and fire taken by an Edison

Company cameraman in January of 1912, and the Lyric ran a picture trip through the Panama Canal with hand-colored pictures, narrated by Mr. V.Z. Upson.

Both theaters were competing with each other and booking vaudeville acts, live wrestling, psychics and thought readers to fill their seats.

Fund raisers for the local lodges and the high school were held at both theaters during 1912. In January, the Tokay presented the junior class of the Lodi High School in a play adapted from Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" with Joe Boyd, Alice Pearson, Leslie Rodgers, Frank Devine, James Clausen, Clara Bauer, Everett McKenzie and Cecil Green in the cast.

The Lyric Theatre changed owners in February, 1912 with Mr. Best selling to George Bailey. In the latter part of March, the Tokay decided to have a special night for high school pupils and other young folks. "Suitable pictures will be displayed every Tuesday night," Mr. Lighthouse said, "Regular rates will prevail, but should vaudeville be given on high school night, it will be of a refined nature."

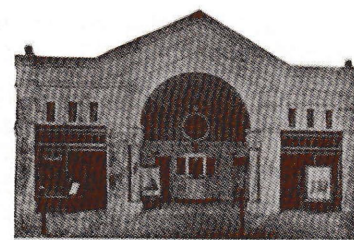
At the very same time, the Lyric Theatre printed coupons in the Lodi Sentinel for the Children's Hour. On any Saturday afternoon, the coupon admitted any grammar school pupil for one penny at the theater on Sacramento Street.

The newspaper reported that City Marshall Coleman will be on hand during the performance to look after the safety of the children. Several ladies are to attend to the little one's comfort.

Mrs. E.E. Brentenbucher and Mrs. Willard L. Robison will supply piano music while Mrs. John S. Montgomery reads the descriptions of the films.

Others to be present and see that all children are given seats and cared for with as much attention as if they were at home, are Mrs. E.C. Williams, Mrs. T.C. Hawley, Mrs. S.E. Wright, Mrs. J.H. Willims, Mrs. P. Knudson and Mrs. C.J. Chase, representing the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the Women's Improvement Club, the Home and Teachers Association of Emerson and Salem Schools, and the Sentinel.

The doors open 2:15 p.m. and close at 6:00 p.m. with two shows. "His First Long Trousers" will be the first reel,



TOKAY THEATRE

THE HOME OF
PARAMOUNT FEATURES

Lodi : : : California

Ad in 1916 Lodi High School Annual

1,000 feet long, that abounds in clean comedy. Next, "Old and New Methods of Farming" will show the children what an advanced age they live in. The third picture will be of some foreign country, showing how folks live in other lands.

On March 2, 1912, the Lodi Sentinel reported 500 tots at the first Children's Hour and that Principal Custer of Emerson gave a short talk.

The paper further stated that next Saturday the first show will start at 2:30 p.m. and then the doors will close. Parents who want to attend should try the second show at 3:30 p.m. The good ladies of the W.C.T.U. selected the films for next Saturday's Children's Hour, with Miss Hazel Ham to play the piano. The coupon cut from the Sentinel newspaper permits any child under 12 years of age to spend an hour at the Lyric.

The Lodi Sentinel reported that the third Saturday of Children's Hour was to have more comedy and scenic pictures with less drama.

The last Children's Hour show was Saturday, April 27th, 1912 at the Lyric Theatre. The following Saturday the Salem School gave two shows at the Tokay Theatre, recitation and plays



1950 — The Lodi Theatre, northwest corner of Oak and School Streets

between three reels of film. The proceeds were used for their school piano debt.

In the early moving pictures theaters in Lodi as well as most places at this time, show business, in the form of vaudeville acts, plays and concerts, often went hand in hand with the showing of the films. Both the Tokay and Lyric Theatres were having new pictures every week with different vaudeville acts. Some that were local acts, or of special interest were as follows.

May saw Bulcer's Performing Goats in "Uncle Tom's Cabin" at the Tokay, and the Lodge of Red Men gave a benefit at the Lyric. The same month a large crowd turned out at the Tokay to see and hear the maiden performance of a Lodi trio: Harry Cutts, vocalist; Louis Newfield, eccentric piano player; and Jack Evans, who did political sketching and quick landscape painting. They called the act "The Comedy Two and a Half." Jack Evans, who was much smaller than the others, constituted the half. The group the day after their local appearance was to open at the Princess Theatre in San Francisco.

In July, the Tokay had Alice Teddy, the roller skating bear, and two weeks later, the Maccabee Lodge presented a comedy, "A Family Affair," to raise funds for new uniforms for the Degree Team. Preston Sollars was stage manager with Lyla Mitchell, Grover Ware, Albert Randolph, Leslie Johns, Eleanor Prouty and Daniel Morgan in

the cast.

Alzada Cutts, a Lodi girl, sang illustrated songs at the Lyric in September and "Willie Roberts," an ex-convict, gave a lecture and illustrations on "Fourteen Year Sentence in San Quentin." At the same time, the Lyric removed one row of chairs, thus widening the aisles for patrons to reach the four exits in case of fire.

As of January, 1913, Henry Lighthouse and Herbert Sievers formed a trust company and purchased the Lyric Theatre from George Bailey, including the equipment and the lease on the building. They then announced that the theatre would remain open only on Saturday and Sunday evenings.

Mr. Lighthouse was quoted as saying, "Lodi is not large enough to support two moving picture houses. The last two years neither of us have been making money."

A month later Henry Lighthouse sold his interest to Jacob Gatzert, and the new firm was Gatzert and Sievers.

The Tokay went on as before but the Lyric was not mentioned in the newspapers after the summer of 1913.

"The Perils of Pauline," a popular weekly serial movie, and some acts were shown and on May 16, 1916, "The Clansman" was given at the Tokay. This was the biggest and greatest movie of this era. It was twelve reels in length and the picture was accompanied by an orchestra and singers.

The legitimate theaters had abandoned drama in favor of two and three

reelers. It was the demise of the Nickelodeons and the start of the big movie studios such as Paramount Pictures, United Artist and Warner Brothers. There was a battle for control of theaters and pictures.

In 1916, Jacob Gatzert went back to the bakery business. Herb Sievers became an accountant and later worked for the county assessor. They still owned the building but were not active in the operation.

During 1917 the program calendar of the Tokay featured such stars as George M. Cohen, Douglas Fairbanks, Madam Petrova, Fannie Ward, Mary Pickford, Billie Burke, Dustin Farnum and Dorothy Dalton.

The Tokay had a new manager in 1918, Mr. A.A. Richards, who also became manager of the New Lodi Theatre on School Street.

The Tokay was closed and on September 26, 1918, a Tuesday, the Theatre Lodi had its grand opening.

The Lodi Investment Company built a theater auditorium with seating for 1,100 people that would provide theater for the next two generations.

A full house was on hand for the first production in the Theatre Lodi - a play, "Parlor, Bedroom and Bath." The admission price: 50¢ - \$1.50. The comedy was put on by a cast of New York actors.

After the first act George M. Steele, Lodi attorney, appeared on the stage and congratulated the Lodi Investment Company for financing the theatre and introduced manager A.A. Richards.

The theater was an imposing structure of fine architectural design, with the general color scheme of cream and tan within and outside the building. On each side of the entrance were spaces for stores. The north space became a soda fountain and lunch counter.

The stage was large with a curtain valued at \$1,050. The orchestra pit was hidden from the audience. There were eight loges in the lower part of the balcony. The theatre was fortunate in having good acoustics.

In 1920 the Theatre Lodi became the T & D Theatre with Frank Vesley as manager. During the early years of this theatre, concerts and vaudeville acts were performed in addition to the first-class moving pictures. Trixie Friganza, comedienne, appeared in "Poor Mama" and Wallace Reid, early moving picture star, was in Lodi May 6, 1900 in the comedy "The Rotters."

A benefit show for the building fund of the Lodi Women's Club occurred June 9th of the same year with Rosabelle Long Wakefield of Lodi featured in the program. Mrs. Wakefield, who developed an unusual

coloratura soprano voice under the tutelage of Madam Marks of San Francisco, had been appearing in concerts in the City by the Bay.

During the program at Lodi Theatre, Rosabelle Wakefield sang "Heather Time," a song published by Maurice Hill, high school student at the time. During the intermission young ladies sold copies of the song with half the proceeds donated to the building fund, which totaled \$37.50.

The Tokay Theatre was dark at this time but Henry Lighthouse, the man who started the theatre on Elm Street, became owner of the Maze Theatre in Stockton after selling his local interest. At the age of 87 years he passed away at the home of his daughter, Mabel Cook of Lodi, on August 14, 1921.

Over the next three years, Verne Taylor was manager of the "T & D" for two years, and then Wm. Muehlman was in charge for one year.

For some reason the T & D Theatre added the word "Junior" to the title in 1926 and W.J. Slattery was the manager.

The next year the T & D Soda Fountain opened with Vic Poncelet and T.E.

Van Omen the owners. Barney A. Gurnette started a four-year term as theatre manager.

The Tokay Theatre had reopened and in 1928 it was listed with Jack Marpole in charge. After 1929 the Tokay did not advertise.

The year 1930 saw C.H. Cole running the T & D Soda Fountain and two years later Ben J. Muller was in charge of the T & D Junior.

Muller was still manager in 1936 but the name was now Lodi Theatre. The same year Mrs. Jacob Gatzert and Mr. Sievers sold the Elm Street building to the Fox West Coast Corporation.

The next year, 1937, Walter Scott helped take down the old marquee and raise the new sign for the Fox State Theatre which opened with Nevin Seamond as manager of both the State and Lodi Theatres.

Terry Ruff and A.J. Mealey were managing the State and Lodi Theatres respectively, when on October 10, 1941, fire swept through the northwest section of the Lodi Theatre. Eight persons were injured or overcome by smoke. The fire occurred during a matinee performance.



August 5, 1960 — Small fire at Hotel Lodi



June 19, 1962 — Lodi Theatre Fire (Early Morning)

PHOTO BY PAUL ZIMMERMAN

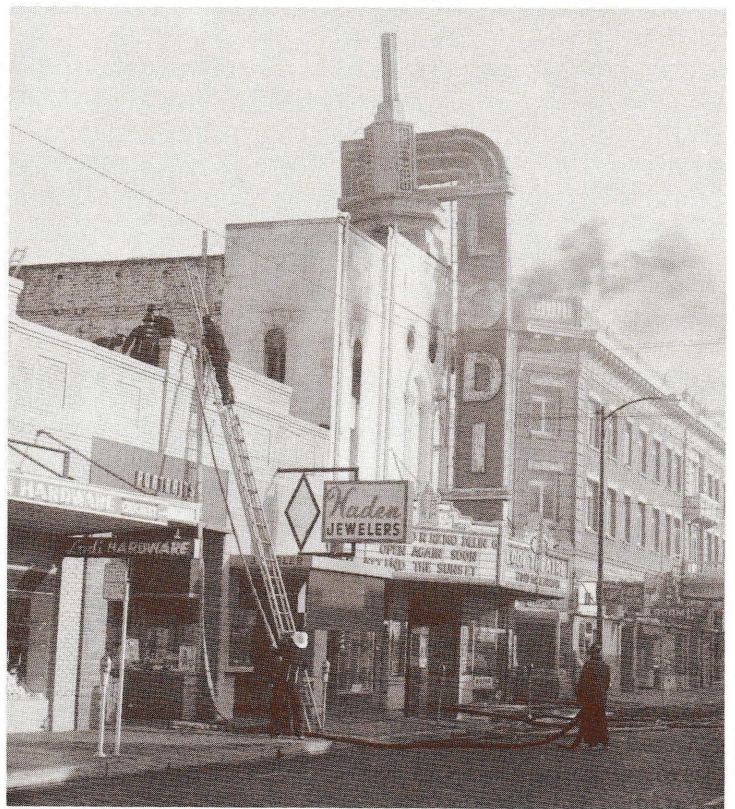
The Lodi Theatre rebuilt and reopened in a short time and things were back to normal. Mealey remained until David J. Reese took over in 1947.

A year later Ed Kundert located a spot for a new theatre in Lodi, and on January 20, 1950, the Sunset Theatre had its grand opening. 2,000 people congregated in front of the theatre to witness Mayor Robert Rinn slash the ribbon of moving picture film at 6:15 p.m. The high school band, under the direction of Syd Halsey, played stirring tunes including the "Marine Corps Hymn." The opening picture was "Sands of Iwo Jima," and the marines placed a 16-ton amphibious tractor and color guard in front of the Sunset. Don Nichols was appointed the first manager.

At this time, Lodi had three theatres operating. The Sunset and Lodi had first-run movies, and the State Theatre specialized in westerns, older films and foreign language movies.

The State Theatre closed down in 1954, but Walter Rott bought the business and building from Fox West Coast and reopened October 20, 1955. The next year Rott sold the business to Frank and Kay Ost. The new managers, Kenneth Wright and Ahmed Mohamed had the building thoroughly fumigated. The theatre marquee had this message, "The Fleas Have Fled the State."

The last change in the State and former Tokay Theatre was its conversion into a cabaret dancing hall in November of 1961 by Jerry Dean. When the north end of the building



June 1962 — After the fire and after the 'Lodi' sign is down.

PHOTO BY PAUL ZIMMERMAN

of Lodi movies came to an end.

Not far behind was the Lodi Theatre, which was consumed by fire early in the morning on June 29, 1962. Only the walls were left standing. Arson was suspected in the \$100,000 loss.

Also gone was the sight of this handsome building when a year later, the

last wall had been battered down.

Television brings us the new and old movies, but the memory of 500 youngsters screaming at their favorite serial or the thrill of holding hands on many Lodi students' first date will be hard to erase.



▲ Humor relieves the stress in the aftermath of the 1962 fire.

◀ Looking over the damage done to the snack bar at Lodi Theatre.

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June 1962 — Inside Lodi Theatre